

## CHAPTER VI

THE PROBLEM OF AUTHENTICITY,  
OR EXTERNAL CRITICISM

So far it has been assumed that the documents dealt with have been authentic. The problem of authenticity seldom concerns the sociologist or psychologist or anthropologist, who generally has a living subject under his eye, can see him as he prepares his autobiography, and can cross-examine him about doubtful points. Even in the law courts the question of authenticity of documents becomes a difficult problem only on rare occasions, when the writer or witnesses to the writing cannot be produced.<sup>1</sup> But for historical documents those occasions are not rare. They are in fact frequent for manuscript sources; and if doubt as to authenticity arises less often for printed sources, it is because usually some skilled editor has already performed the task of authenticating them.

*Forged or Misleading Documents*

Forgeries of documents in whole or in part without being usual, are common enough to keep the careful historian constantly on his guard. "Historical documents" are fabricated for several reasons. Sometimes

(1) they are used to bolster a false claim or title. A well-known example is the Donation of Constantine, which

<sup>1</sup> Wigmore, pp. 326-36.

used to be cited on occasion to bolster a theory that the popes had a wide territorial claim in the west. In 1440 Lorenzo Valla proved, chiefly by means of anachronisms of style and allusion, that it had been forged. At other times documents are counterfeited for sale. Counterfeit letters of Queen Marie Antoinette used to turn up frequently.<sup>2</sup> A Philadelphia autograph dealer named Robert Spring once manufactured hundreds of skillful forgeries in order to supply the demand of collectors. A recent notorious example of forgery was the "correspondence" of Abraham Lincoln and Ann Rutledge, palmed off on the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1928.

(2) Sometimes fabrication is due to less mercenary considerations. Political propaganda largely accounts for the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a "document" pretending to reveal a ruthless Jewish conspiracy to rule the world. Sometimes historical "facts" are based only on some practical joke, as in the case of H. L. Menck-  
en's much cited article on the "history" of the bathtub, or of Alexander Woolcott's mocking letter of endorsement of Dorothy Parker's husband (of which he never sent the original to the supposed addressee, although he did send the carbon copy to the endorsee).<sup>4</sup> The *Mémoires* of Madame d'Epinau are a striking ex-

<sup>2</sup> Lord Action, *Lectures on the French Revolution* (London, 1910), pp. 361-4.

<sup>3</sup> See J. S. Curtis, *An Appraisal of the Protocols of Zion* (New York, 1942).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. C. D. MacDougall, *Hoaxes* (New York, 1940), pp. 302-9; Dorothy Parker, reviewing A. Woolcott: *His Life and His World* by S. H. Adams (New York, 1945) in the *Chicago Sun Book Week* of June 10, 1945.

ample of fabrication of a whole book that has beguiled even respectable historians.<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes quite genuine documents are intended to ~~mislead certain contemporaries and hence have misled subsequent historians~~. A statement supposed to be that of Emperor Leopold II's views on the French Revolution misled Marie Antoinette and subsequently even the most careful historians until it was exposed in 1894 as a wishful statement of some French émigrés.<sup>4</sup> In days when spies were expected to open mail in the post, writers of letters would occasionally try to outwit them by turning their curiosity to the advantage of the one spied upon rather than to that of the spy or his employer.<sup>5</sup> And when censors might condemn books to be burned and writers to be imprisoned, authors could hardly be blamed if they sometimes signed others' names to their work. For instance, it is hard to tell whether some works actually written by Voltaire are not still ascribed to others. It is thus possible to be too skeptical about a document which may be genuine though not what it seems. Bernheim has provided a list of documents that were once hypercritically considered unauthentic but are now accepted.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps it was hypercriticism of this

<sup>3</sup> The "cheating document" is discussed with a wealth of absorbing detail in Allan Nevins, *Gateway to History* (Boston, 1938), ch. V, pp. 119-37.

<sup>4</sup> Acton, *French Revolution*, p. 119.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Lafayette to William Carmichael, March 10, 1785, quoted in Louis Gottschalk, *Lafayette between the American and the French Revolution* (Chicago, 1950), pp. 156-7.

<sup>6</sup> Ernst Bernheim, *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode und der Geschichtswissenschaften* (6th ed.; Leipzig, 1908), pp. 376-91.

kind that led Vincent Starrett to write his verse entitled "After Much Striving for Fame":

It would be rather jolly, I think,  
To be the original authority  
On some obscure matter of literature or faith  
Upon which, in one's leisure,  
One had jotted down an inaccurate pamphlet,  
And forever thereafter  
To be quoted by all post-Vincentian borrowers  
In a pertinacious footnote.<sup>7</sup>

Occasionally misrepresentations of the nature of printed works result from editors' tricks. It is still a matter of dispute which of the many writings attributed to Cardinal Richelieu were in fact written or dictated by him; and little of the so-called *Mémoires de Jean de Witt* and *Testament politique de Colbert* were in fact written by John de Witt and Colbert. The memoirs attributed to Condorcet and to Weber, foster-brother of Marie Antoinette, and several works ascribed to Napoleon I are by others than their alleged authors. Even issues of daily newspapers have been manufactured long after the dates they bear. The *Moniteur* furnishes some good examples (see p. 107 above). Several *Diaries* of Napoleon have been made up by others from his writings. The circumstances of the forgery or misrepresentation of historical documents may often ~~themselves~~ reveal important political, cultural, and biographical information — but not about the same events or persons as if they were genuine.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by permission of Mr. Starrett.

### *Tests of Authenticity*

To distinguish a hoax or a misrepresentation from a genuine document, the historian has to use tests that are common also in police and legal detection. Making the best guess he can of the *date* of the document (see below pp. 138 and 147-8), he examines the materials to see whether they are not *anachronistic*: paper was rare in Europe before the fifteenth century, and printing was unknown; pencils did not exist there before the sixteenth century; typewriting was not invented until the nineteenth century; and India paper came only at the end of that century. The historian also examines the ink for signs of age or for *anachronistic* chemical composition. Making his best guess of ~~the possible author of the~~ document (see below pp. 144-7), he sees if he can identify the handwriting, signature, seal, letterhead, or watermark. Even when the handwriting is unfamiliar, it can be compared with authenticated specimens. One of the unfulfilled needs of the historian is more of what the French call "isographies"—dictionaries of biography giving examples of handwriting. For some periods of history, experts using techniques known as paleography and diplomats, first systematized by Mabillon in the seventeenth century (see p. 127 below), have long known that in certain regions at certain times handwriting and the style and form of official documents were more or less conventionalized. Seals have been the subject of special study by sigillographers, and experts can detect faked ones (see below, p. 128). *Anachronistic style* (idiom, orthography, or punctua-

tion) can be detected by specialists who are familiar with contemporary writing.<sup>10</sup> Often spelling, particularly of proper names and signatures (because too good or too bad or anachronistic), reveals a forgery, as would also unhistoric grammar. *Anachronistic references to events* (too early or too late or too remote) or the dating of a document at a time when the alleged writer could not possibly have been at the place designated (the *alibi*) uncovers fraud. Sometimes the skillful forger has all too carefully followed the best historical sources and his product becomes too obviously a copy in certain passages; or where, by skillful paraphrase and invention, he is shrewd enough to avoid detection in that fashion, he is given away by the *absence of trivia and otherwise unknown details* from his manufactured account.<sup>11</sup> Usually, however, if the document is where it ought to be—for example, in a family's archives, or among a business firm's or lawyer's papers, or in a governmental bureau's records (but not merely because it is in a library or in an amateur's autograph collection)—its *provenance* (or its *custody*, as the lawyers call it),<sup>12</sup> creates a presumption of its genuineness.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Marcel Cohen, "Comment on parlait le français en 1700," *L'Europe*, XXV (1917), 18-23.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *They Knew the Washingtons; Letters from a French Soldier with Lafayette and from His Family in Virginia*, tr. Princess Radziwill (Indianapolis, 1926); and Henri Béraud, *My Friend Robespierre*, tr. Slater Brown (New York, 1928).

<sup>12</sup> *Wigmore*, pp. 330-1.

### *Garbled Documents*

A document that in its entirety or in large part is the result of a deliberate effort to deceive may often be hard to evaluate, but it sometimes causes less trouble than does the document that is unauthentic only in small part. For such parts are usually the result, not of studied falsehood, but of unintentional error. They occur most frequently in copies of documents whose originals have disappeared, and are generally due to that kind of error of omission, repetition, or addition with which anyone who has ever made copies soon becomes familiar. Sometimes they are the result, however, not of carelessness but of deliberate intention to modify, supplement, or continue the original. Such a change may be made in good faith in the first instance, care being exerted to indicate the differences between the original text and the glossary or continuations, but future copyists are often less careful or more confused and make no such distinctions.

This problem is most familiar to classical philologists and Bible critics. For they seldom have copies less than eight centuries and several stages of reproduction removed from the original — that is to say, copies of copies of copies, and sometimes copies of translations of copies of translations of copies, and so on. The philologists give to this problem of establishing an accurate text the name *textual criticism*, and in Biblical studies it is also called *lower criticism*. The historian has borrowed his technique from philologists and Bible critics.

### *The Restoration of Texts*

The technique is complicated but can be briefly described. The first task is to collect as many copies of the dubious text as diligent search will reveal. Then they are compared. It is found that some contain words or phrases or whole passages that are not contained in others. The question then arises: Are those words, phrases or passages additions to the original text that have found their way into some copies, or are they omissions from the others? To answer that question it is necessary to divide the available copies into one or more "families" — that is, groups of texts which closely resemble each other and therefore seem to be derived, directly or indirectly, from the same master copy. Then by a comparison of the texts within each family an effort is made to establish the comparative age of each in relation to the others. If the members of the same family are largely copied from each other, as this arrangement in families frequently shows, the oldest one is in all probability (but not necessarily) the one nearest the original. This process is continued for all the families. When the copy nearest the original in each family is discovered, a comparison of all of these "father" copies will usually then reveal words and passages that are in some but not in others. Again the question arises: Are those words and passages additions to the copies that have them or omissions from the copies that do not? The most accurate available wordings of the passages added or omitted by the respective copyists are then prepared. Changes in handwritings, anachronisms in

style, grammar, orthography, or factual detail, and opinions or errors unlikely to have been those of the original author frequently reveal additions by a later hand. When the style and contents of passages under discussion may be attributed to the author, it is safe to assume that they were parts of his original manuscript but were omitted by later copyists; and when they cannot be attributed to the author, it is safe to assume that they were not parts of his original manuscript. In some cases, a final decision has to await the discovery of still more copies. In many instances the original text can be approximately or entirely restored.

By a similar method one can even guess the contents, at least in part, of a "father" manuscript even when no full copy of it is in existence. The historian Wilhelm von Giesebrecht, a student of Ranke, attempted to reconstruct a text that he reasoned must be the ancestor of several eleventh-century chronicles in which he had noted striking similarities. By adding together the passages that appeared to be "descended" from an unknown chronicle, he made a guess as to its contents. Over a quarter of a century later the ancestor chronicle was in fact found, and proved to be extensively like Giesebrecht's guess.

### *Sciences Auxiliary to History*

The problem of textual restoration does not frequently disturb the present-day historian, chiefly because many experts, engaged in what the historian egocentrically calls "sciences auxiliary to history," provide him with critically prepared texts. Since Jean François Champollion in 1822 learned to de-

cipher hieroglyphics, part of the work of *Egyptologists* and *papyrologists* has been to provide the historian with texts and translations of inscriptions and papyri found in the ancient Nile Valley, whether in Egyptian hieroglyphic or in cursive hieratic and demotic or in Greek. The *Assyriologists*, since Sir Henry Rawlinson in 1847 deciphered Old Persian cuneiform and in 1850 Babylonian cuneiform, have been publishing and translating the texts found on the clay tablets of the ancient Tigris-Euphrates civilizations. *Biblical criticism*, even before Erasmus, was directed to the effort of bringing the text of both the Old and the New Testament as close as possible to the original wording and of explaining as fully as possible the Hebrew and Hellenistic civilizations which they reflected. *Philology*, as already explained, deals among other things with the derivation from variant texts of the most authentic ones (especially of classical literature). The *classical epigrapher* restores and edits the texts of Greek and Latin inscriptions found on the gravestones, monuments, and buildings of ancient Greece and Rome. The *paleographer*, since the time that Mabillon (see p. 122) first formalized the principles of *paleography* and *diplomacy*, has been able to authenticate medieval charters and other documents by their handwritings, which have been found to vary from place to place and from time to time, and by their variant but highly stylized conventions and forms, and to publish easily legible printed versions of them. The *archeologist* excavates ancient sites and provides the historian with information derived from artifacts such as statues, mausoleums, pottery, build-

ings, and building materials. The science of *numismatics* has enabled the numismatist to authenticate and date coins and metals and to decipher and explain their inscriptions. *Sphragistics* (or *sigillography*) has done the same thing with regard to seals, and in so doing has provided an additional test for the authenticity of the documents whose seals they authenticate. The sciences of *heraldry* and *genealogy* authenticate coats of arms and lines of descent, and genealogists put forth dictionaries of genealogy and genealogical tables. The *bibliographer* furnishes information with regard to books and authors, provides bibliographies, catalogues, and dictionaries of authors, authenticates incunabula, first editions, and rare items, detects hoaxes, and identifies anonymities. The *lexicographer* prepares dictionaries of words, gives their derivation, and the history and examples of their variant usages; much interesting historical knowledge will disappear if lexicographers should ever fail to record the derivation of numerous words like *bonfire*, *chauvinism*, *china*, *boycott*, *lynch*, and *macadamize* (which will repay looking up in the dictionary). Of late, social scientists such as the *educationist*, the *anthropologist*, the *psychologist*, and the *sociologist* have been publishing questionnaires, public opinion polls, statistics on populations and social change, etc. Conclusions obtained from such materials and so-called "personal documents" or autobiographies collected by social scientists have been or will be useful to the historian. So long as the historian's work deals with printed materials prepared by skillful specialists in "the sciences auxiliary to history" he is saved from the gravest dan-

gers of the historical hoax or the garbled document. He may analyze their publications on the cheerful assumption that they are authentic as documents, and he need only determine the credibility of their contents.

### *Chronology as an Auxiliary Science*

The study of *chronology* simplifies for the historian the vital problem of time measurement. The chronologist clarifies the various calendars that have been in use in different places at different times and makes it possible to translate datings from one calendar into the others. This is no simple task, because there have been many different ways of reckoning time in the world's history. Even when western Europe was religiously united under the Catholics and widely accepted the (erroneously dated) birth of Jesus as a zero point from which to count time forward and backward, various localities celebrated New Year's day on different dates and so, for part of the year at least, did not agree as to what year it was. Pope Gregory XIII in the sixteenth century, reformed the curious mixture of Egyptian, Roman, and Christian reckonings used till then and known as the "Julian Calendar," and brought it into greater conformance with the latest astronomical knowledge. But by that time Christendom was split into Greek Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant fractions, and his reform at first prevailed only in the Catholic countries. Protestant countries adopted it one by one. In the British possessions it was not accepted until 1752, when the Old Style of dating was eleven days behind the Gre-

gorian (or New Style) calendar, and when from January 1 to March 24 the Old Style Calendar was one year earlier, because it reckoned the new year as not beginning until March 25. That is why we celebrate Washington's birthday as of February 22, 1732, although his family Bible records it as of February 11, 1731. The countries under Orthodox influence did not generally accept the Gregorian calendar until the twentieth century, when their Old Style calendar was thirteen days behind the Gregorian. That explains why the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 is still referred to as the "October Revolution" although the Russians celebrate its anniversary on what is now November 7.

At least two common errors can be avoided by bearing in mind that the Gregorian calendar contains no year 0. The first century A.D. ran from the year 1 to the year 100, and the nineteenth century from 1801 to 1900; and the twentieth century will run from 1901 to 2000. Hence the first half of the nineteenth century did not end until midnight, December 31, 1850 (not 1849), and the same holds true for earlier centuries as well as for our own. For the same reason a calculation of the lapse of time between a year B.C. and a year A.D. requires subtraction of 1 from their sums. Thus, the lapse of time between 1 B.C. and A.D. 1 was not two years (more or less) but one year (more or less), and that between 63 B.C. and A.D. 14 (the dates of Augustus) would be 76 years (not 77).

All Christendom and many other peoples under Western influence now use the Gregorian calendar,

but some non-Christian peoples (e.g., the Moslems and the Israeli) still use calendars derived from their independent religious traditions. The attempt of the French Revolutionary assemblies to adopt a scientific calendar encountered religious opposition and failed (unlike their reform of weights and measures by the introduction of the metric system). The preparation of concordances for the different styles of reckoning time is the business of the chronologist. He also provides tables and thesauri of persons and events with dates in order to make "the art of verifying dates" simpler.

### *Variants Among the Sources*

Often, the historian runs into two or more different texts of the same document published by responsible experts. And in modern history, where thousands of archives and libraries, and the stacks, vaults, and filing-cases of lawyers, courts, doctors, psychoanalysts, business firms, social agencies, autograph collectors and dealers, families, kings, presidents, governors, ministries, legislatures, armies, navies, committees, churches, schools, teachers, county and municipal officials, tax and police authorities, newspapers, clubs, academies, lodges, commissions, etc. are crammed with unpublished documents, he sometimes comes upon two or more manuscript or typewritten copies of the same document that are not identical. The blockade by the English of the American coast during the American War of Independence necessitated sending three or four copies of important letters from America to France and those copies did not always



agree in detail. In the warehouses full of paper on the Second World War, there are bound to be several drafts or copies of the same document that nevertheless will show discrepancies. In such instances the historian has to try, like the philologist, to determine which copy is the nearest to the original in time; that usually makes it easier to determine additions and omissions and thus to explain the discrepancies.

Sometimes, too, published versions are incorrect, and comparison with the original manuscript is required.<sup>13</sup> More often paraphrases and descriptions of the sources are faulty. One must always remember the lesson of the heresy trial of Professor G. B. Foster of the University of Chicago Divinity School. When he was brought up before an ecclesiastical conference on the charge of having called those who believed in the Bible *knaves*, it was found by reference to the proper page in his book that what he had in fact said was, "He who calls himself a Bible believer is a *naïve*."<sup>14</sup> No less astute a person than the Russian diplomat Andrei Vishinsky in 1948 announced before the United Nations that an American map existed of "the Third World War, Pacific theatre of military operations," but reference to the map itself revealed it was entitled "War Map III Featuring the Pacific

<sup>13</sup> For example, the published version of an important document in the so-called "Conway cabal" rendered as "tho he" words that were in the original "Mr. Lee," thus long obscuring the part Francis Lightfoot Lee played in the "cabal." See Louis Gottschalk, *Lafayette Joins the American Army* (Chicago, 1937), p. 120 and n. Cf. Louis Gottschalk and Josephine Fennell, "Duer and the 'Conway Cabal,'" *American Historical Review*, LII (1946), 87-96.

<sup>14</sup> Wigmore, pp. 219-20.

Theatre." It was nothing more than the third map relating to the war (the first two were of the European theatre) published by a certain American map company during the Second World War.<sup>15</sup>

### *The Problem of Meaning: Semantics*

Having procured as nearly accurate a text as his sources will provide, the historian is then faced with the task of determining its meaning. This is the problem that in Biblical criticism is called *hermeneutics* and *exegesis*. It sometimes involves the varying signification of words — or semantics. Such problems may call only for the use of a dictionary, but that means, wherever possible, lexicons contemporary to the author of the document or, at least, a dictionary arranged on historical principles; for the meanings of words often change from generation to generation. The words *liberty* and *right* seldom mean more than *privilege* in feudal documents; and the word *proletarian* meant little more than *vile* or *vulgar* before the nineteenth century. *Imperialist* was a more laudatory term in the 1880's than in the 1950's; and today *democracy* changes meaning as one travels east or west of the Oder River. Failure to realize such changes in meaning may lead to thorough misunderstanding of important historical developments.

The semantic problem also involves the exploitation of all the knowledge that the historian possesses concerning the period and the witness. For frequently witnesses, particularly illiterate ones, do not use dic-

<sup>15</sup> *New York Times*, October 3, 1948, reproduces the front page of the map.



tionary words, or use dictionary words in senses and in combinations not authorized by the dictionaries. Moreover, failure to appreciate the intellectual climate in which the witness lived may make words conveying his aspirations, superstitions, or other ideas lose some of their overtones. Knowing that witches are real to some people, that the divine intervention of the gods is no less real to others, that devils, imps, and fairies inhabit various worlds, that private property is sacred to some and anathema to others, that God saves some by inner grace and others by good works, that miracles are signs of holiness to some and of credulity to others — knowing such patterns of thought and hundreds more like them, contradictory or supplementary, enables the historian of each era to grasp nuances that might otherwise escape him. The historian's task is to understand not only what a document's words may formally mean but also what his witness really intended to say.

### *The Problem of Meaning: Hermeneutics*

When one encounters language that is ambiguous, an additional query arises since the ambiguity might or might not have been accidental. What, for example, did the man mean who wrote to an author, "I shall lose no time reading your book"? Did he mean that the book was well worth reading, or that it would be a waste of time to read it and he therefore would not do so, or that he would hasten to read it? And was the ambiguity unintentional? If, as is sometimes said, the man was the cynical Benjamin Disraeli, it probably was not, but without any context

one might assume the remark was intended to be polite though unhappily phrased.

The hermeneutic problem becomes especially acute when a deliberate intention to hide the meaning is suspected. The deliberate hiding of meaning involves not merely the problem of code and cypher and the danger of reading one's prejudices into a document;<sup>14</sup> it involves also a certain amount of skill with riddles, puzzles, and word-tricks. The *New York Times*, shortly after the 1940 invasion of France, published an octave (translated on p. 136) which, appearing originally in *Paris-Soir*, seemed to indicate some Frenchman's great admiration for Hitler and contempt for the English:

Aimons et admirons le Chancelier Hitler  
L'éternelle Angleterre est indigne de vivre;  
Maudissons et écrasons le peuple d'outremer;  
Le Nazi sur la terre sera seul à survivre.  
Soyons donc le soutien du Fuehrer allemand,  
Des boys navigateurs finira l'odyssée;  
A eux seuls appartient un juste châtiment;  
La palme du vainqueur attend la Croix gammée.

But any historian would have been thoroughly deceived as to its meaning and purport, and therefore as to the writer's and publisher's traits and attitudes, if he had taken it at its face value. For these are Alexandrine verses, and by separation on the caesura, two stanzas of eight lines each are produced that have an altogether opposite meaning, as the *Times's* translation showed:

<sup>14</sup> Cf. M. R. Cohen and Ernest Nagel, *An Introduction to Logic and Scientific Method* (New York, 1934), pp. 329-34.

|                           |                            |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| With love let us praise   | Hitler, the Chancellor,    |
| Everlasting England       | Is unworthy of life,       |
| Let us curse, let us raze | The transChannel mentor -- |
| On earth, the Nazi band   | Sole survivor in strife -- |
| Let us then bear support  | For the German Chief       |
| For the boys plowing the  |                            |
| sea                       | Shall the Odyssey fade,    |
| By whose sole effort      | Just punishment obtain,    |
| The victory shall be      | For the Swastika glaive.   |

### *Historical-Mindedness*

Closely related to the semantic and hermeneutic problem is that of understanding and appreciating behavior in its contemporary setting. To judge earlier societies by more advanced codes of ethics; to expect balanced judgments and normal conduct in times of war, revolution, or upheaval; to translate the folkways, conventions, and standards of one country to another; to condemn an individual's act without attempting to comprehend his norms or environment; to be intolerant of an "ignorance" which is in fact a comprehensive knowledge of and a healthy adjustment to a different culture -- these and other failures to place persons and events in their own historical setting would often lead to failure to understand the surviving documents and nearly always to misjudgments of the personalities and mores of that setting.

The ability to put oneself in the place of other individuals of other times and to interpret documents, events, and personalities with their eyes, standards, and sympathies (without necessarily surrendering one's own standards) has sometimes been called his-

esses psychologists call *empathy* and . . . requires a deliberate effort to control and to correct another skill that, while of a similar nature, may easily work in an opposite direction -- the ability to interpret the past in terms of analogy to one's experience (see Chapter XII). Although a historian's questions about any earlier period that he studies are more or less bound to arise from his own present -- his own frames of reference, standards, institutions, situations, traditions, and aspirations, nevertheless he has the obligation as a historian to answer them in terms of his subject's situations and "ecology."

Historical-mindedness requires the investigator to shed his own personality and to take on, as far as possible, that of his subject in the effort to understand the latter's language, ideals, interests, attitudes, habits, motives, drives, and traits. This may be hard to do and the historian may rarely succeed in doing it thoroughly, but the obligation upon him is obvious if he is attempting to understand and impartially judge rather than to criticize others' acts and personalities. Historical-mindedness sometimes requires the historian to make a better case for a subject than the subject could have made for himself, without necessarily believing it. He should put into his personality studies something of the understanding, but not necessarily forgiving, quality that a psychiatrist might give to the study of a patient. This is much the same kind of understanding that Acton admired in George Eliot's character portrayals: "Each of them should say that she displayed him in his strength, that she gave ra-

tional form to motives he had imperfectly analyzed, that she laid bare features in his character he had never realized." " If Morris R. Cohen is right, "To widen our horizon, to make us see other points of view than those to which we are accustomed, is the greatest service that can be rendered by the historian, and this he can do best by concentrating on the special field which he studies to understand."<sup>12</sup>

### *Identification of Author and of Date*

Some guess of the approximate date of the document and some identification of its supposed author (or, at least, a surmise as to his location in time and space and as to his habits, attitudes, character, learning, associates, etc.) obviously form an essential part of *external criticism*. Otherwise it would be impossible to prove or disprove authenticity by anachronisms, handwriting, style, alibi, or other tests that are associated with the author's milieu, personality, and actions. But similar knowledge or guesses are also necessary for *internal criticism*, and therefore the problem of author-identification has been left for the next chapter (pp. 144-8).

Having established an authentic text and discovered what its author really intended to say, the historian has only established what the witness's testimony is. He has yet to determine whether that testimony is at all credible, and if so, to what extent. That is the problem of *internal criticism*.

<sup>12</sup> January 21, 1881, Herbert Paul (ed.), *Letters of Lord Acton to Mary Gladstone* (New York, 1904), p. 159.

<sup>13</sup> *The Meaning of Human History* (La Salle, Ill., 1947), p. 28.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE PROBLEM OF CREDIBILITY, OR INTERNAL CRITICISM

THE HISTORIAN first aims in the examination of testimony to obtain a set of particulars relevant to some topic or question that he has in mind. Isolated particulars have little meaning by themselves, and unless they have a context or fit into a hypothesis they are of doubtful value. But that is a problem of *synthesis*, which will be discussed later.<sup>1</sup> What we are now concerned with is the *analysis* of documents for credible details to be fitted into a hypothesis or context.

### *What Is Historical Fact?*

In the process of *analysis* the historian should constantly keep in mind the relevant particulars within the document rather than the document as a whole. Regarding each particular he asks: Is it credible? It might be well to point out again that what is meant by calling a particular *credible* is not that it is *actually what happened*, but that it is *as close to what actually happened as we can learn from a critical examination of the best available sources*.<sup>2</sup> This means *verisimilar* at a high level. It connotes something more than merely not being preposterous in itself or even than plausible and yet is short of meaning *accurately de-*

<sup>1</sup> See Chapter X.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. above pp. 45-9.

*scriptive of past actuality*. In other words, the historian establishes *verisimilitude* rather than *objective truth*. Though there is a high correlation between the two, they are not necessarily identical. As far as mere particulars are concerned, historians disagree relatively seldom regarding what is *credible* in this special sense of "conforming to a critical examination of the sources." It is not inconceivable that, in dealing with the same document, two historians of equal ability and training would extract the same isolated "facts" and agree with each other's findings. In that way the elementary data of history are subject to *proof*.

A historical "fact" thus may be defined as a particular derived directly or indirectly from historical documents and regarded as credible after careful testing in accordance with the canons of historical method (see below p. 150). An infinity and a multiple variety of facts of this kind are accepted by all historians: e.g., that Socrates really existed; that Alexander invaded India; that the Romans built the Pantheon; that the Chinese have an ancient literature (but here we introduce a complexity with the word *ancient*, which needs definition before its factual quality can be considered certain); that Pope Innocent III excommunicated King John of England; that Michelangelo sculptured "Moses"; that Bismarck modified the dispatch from Ems of King William's secretary; that banks in the United States in 1933 were closed for four days by presidential proclamation; and that "the Yankces" won the "World Series" in 1949. Simple and fully attested "facts" of this kind are rarely disputed. They are easily observed, easily recorded (if

not self-evident, like the Pantheon and Chinese literature), involve no judgments of value (except with regard to the antiquity of Chinese literature), contradict no other knowledge available to us, seem otherwise logically acceptable, and, avoiding generalization, deal with single instances.

Even some apparently simple and concrete statements, however, are subject to question. If no one disputes the historicity of Socrates, there is less agreement regarding Moses and earlier figures of Hebrew folklore. If no one doubts that Michelangelo sculptured his "Moses," a few still think that Shakespeare's plays were in fact written by Francis Bacon. Doubt regarding concrete particulars is likely to be due, however, to lack of testimony based on first-hand observation rather than to disagreement among the witnesses. In general, on simple and concrete matters where testimony of direct observation is available, the testimony can usually be submitted to tests of reliability that will be convincing either *pro* or *con* to most competent and impartial historians. As soon as abstractions, value judgments, generalizations, and other complexities enter into testimony the possibility of contradiction and debate enters with them. Hence, alongside the multitude of facts generally accepted by historians, exists another multitude debated (or at least debatable) by them.

### *The Interrogative Hypothesis*

In analyzing a document for its isolated "facts," the historian should approach it with a question or a set of questions in mind. The questions may be rela

tively noncommittal. (E.g.: Did Saul try to assassinate David? What were the details of Catiline's life? Who were the crusading companions of Tancred? What was the date of Erasmus' birth? How many men were aboard De Grasse's fleet in 1781? What is the correct spelling of Sieyès? Was Hung Hsiu-chu'an a Christian?) It will be noted that one cannot ask even simple questions like these without knowing enough about some problem in history to ask a question about it, and if one knows enough to ask even the simplest question, one already has some idea and probably some hypothesis regarding it, whether implicit or explicit, whether tentative and flexible or formulated and fixed. Or the hypothesis may be full-fledged, though still implicit and in interrogative form. (E.g.: Can the Jews be held responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus? Did the medieval city develop from the fair? Why did the Anabaptists believe in religious liberty? How did participation in the American Revolution contribute to the spread of liberal ideas among the French aristocracy? Why did Woodrow Wilson deny knowledge of the "secret treaties"? In each of these questions a certain implication is assumed to be true and further clarification of it is sought on an additional working-assumption.

Putting the hypothesis in interrogative form is more judicious than putting it in declarative form if for no other reason than that it is more noncommittal before all the evidence has been examined. It may also help in some small way to solve the delicate problem of relevance of subject matter (see Chapter X be-

low), since only those materials are relevant which lead directly to an answer to the question or indicate that there is no satisfactory answer.

### *The Quest for Particular Details of Testimony*

As has already been pointed out, every historical subject has four aspects — the biographical, the geographical, the chronological, and the occupational or functional. With a set of names, dates, and key-words in mind for each of these aspects, the historical investigator combs his document for relevant particulars (or "notes," as he is more likely to call them). It is generally wise to take notes on relevant matter whether or not it at first appears credible. It may turn out that even false or mistaken testimony has relevance to an understanding of one's problem.

Having accumulated his notes, the investigator must now separate the credible from the incredible. Even from his "notes" he has sometimes to extract still smaller details, for even a single name may reveal a companion of Tancred, a single letter the correct spelling of Sieyès, a single digit the exact number of De Grasse's crew, or a single phrase the motives of Wilson's denial. In detailed investigations few documents are significant as a whole; they serve most often only as mines from which to extract historical ore. Each bit of ore, however, may contain flaws of its own. The general reliability of an author, in other words, has significance only as establishing the probable credibility of his particular statements. From that process of scrupulous analysis emerges an important general rule: *for each particular of a docu-*

ment the process of establishing credibility should be separately undertaken regardless of the general credibility of the author.

### *Identification of Author*

As has already been pointed out (p. 138), some identification of the author is necessary to test a document's authenticity. In the subsequent process of determining the credibility of its particulars, even the most genuine of documents should be regarded as guilty of deceit until proven innocent. The importance of first establishing the author's general reliability is therefore obvious. Where the name of the author can be determined and he is a person about whom biographical data are available, identification is a relatively easy task. Because, in most legal and social science investigations, the witness or the author of a document is personally known and available to the investigator, that question generally presents no insurmountable difficulties to lawyers and social scientists.

The historian, however, is frequently obliged to use documents written by persons about whom nothing or relatively little is known. Even the hundreds of biographical dictionaries and encyclopedias already in existence may be of no help because the author's name is unknown or, if known, not to be found in the reference works. The historian must therefore depend upon the document itself to teach him what it can about the author. A single brief document may teach him much if he asks the right questions. It may,

of course, contain explicit biographical details, but to assume that would be begging the question. Even where it is relatively free from first-person allusions, much may be learned of the author's mental processes and personal attitudes from it alone.

Let us take the usual text of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and assume for the sake of example that we have no knowledge of it except for what its own contents may reveal:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate — we cannot consecrate — we cannot hallow — this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us, — that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion — that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain — that

this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Even a hasty examination will suffice to make clear that the author, at the time of writing, was planning to use it as a speech ("we are met," "what we say here"), that he wrote English well, that his address was a funeral oration ("we have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place"), that he was probably a prominent citizen, that he presumably was an American ("our fathers," "this continent," "new nation," "four score and seven years ago"), that he was an advocate of liberty and equality (or at least desired his hearers to think so), that he lived during the American Civil War, that he was speaking at Gettysburg, or possibly Vicksburg ("great battlefield," "four score and seven years ago"), and that he wanted his side in the war to be thought of as fighting for democracy ("government of the people, by the people, for the people"). If we forget the controversy among historians as to whether the words *under God* were actually delivered or were only afterward inserted, we may assume that he subscribed, or wished to appear to subscribe, to the belief in a Supreme Being.

From a short document, it would thus appear, it is possible to learn much about the author without knowing who he was. In the case of the Gettysburg Address a trained historian would probably soon detect Lincoln's authorship, if it were unknown. But even if he had never heard of Lincoln, he would be

able to tell that, in attempting to judge the truth of the particulars stated in that address, he would have to consider it as probably a public exhortation by a prominent antislavery Northerner after a major victory over the Confederate States in the American Civil War. Many documents, being less modest and less economical of words than the Gettysburg Address, give their authors away more readily.

### *Determination of Approximate Date*

It would be relatively easy, even if the Gettysburg Address were a totally strange document, to establish its approximate date. It was obviously composed "four-score and seven years" after the Declaration of Independence, hence in 1863. But few strange documents are so easily dated. One has frequently to resort to the conjectures known to the historian as the *terminus non ante quem* ("the point not before which") and the *terminus non post quem* ("the point not after which"). These *termini*, or points, have to be established by internal evidence — by clues given within the document itself. If the date 1863 were not implicit in the Gettysburg Address, other references within the speech could point obviously to the beginning of the American Civil War as its *terminus non ante quem*, and since the war was obviously still going on when the document was composed, its *terminus non post quem* would be the end of the Civil War. Hence its date could be fixed approximately, even if the first sentence had been lost, as somewhere between 1861 and 1865; and if we were enabled by other data to guess at "the great battlefield," we



might even narrow that margin. Some documents might not permit even a remote guess of their termini, but where the author is known, one has at least the dates of his birth and death to go by.

### *The Personal Equation*

This analysis of the Gettysburg Address (under the false assumption that its authorship is unknown) indicates the type of question the historian asks of both anonymous and avowed documents. Was the author an eyewitness of the events he narrates? If not, what were his sources of information? When did he write the document? How much time elapsed between the event and the record? What was his purpose in writing or speaking? Who were his audience and why? Such questions enable the historian to answer the still more important questions: Was the author of the document able to tell the truth; and if able, was he willing to do so? The ability and the willingness of a witness to give dependable testimony are determined by a number of factors in his personality and social situation that together are sometimes called his "personal equation," a term applied to the correction required in astronomical observations to allow for the habitual inaccuracy of individual observers. The personal equation of a historian is sometimes also called his "frame of reference," but it probably will be found more expedient to restrict the latter term to his conscious philosophy or philosophies of life in so far as they can be divorced from personality traits and biases of which he may or may not be aware.

### *General Rules*

In a law court it is frequently assumed that all the testimony of a witness, though under oath, is suspect if the opposing lawyers can impugn his general character or by examination and cross-examination create doubt of his veracity in some regard. Even in modern law courts the old maxim *falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus* tends to be overemphasized.<sup>2</sup> In addition, hearsay evidence is as a general rule excluded; "certain kinds of witnesses are "privileged" or "unqualified" and therefore are not obliged to testify or are kept from testifying;<sup>3</sup> and evidence obtained by certain means regarded as transgressing the citizen's rights — such as "third degree," drugs, wire-tapping, or lie-detector — are ruled out of some courts. The legal system of evidence, says James Bradley Thayer, "is not concerned with nice definitions, or the exacter academic operations of the logical faculty. . . . Its rules . . . are seeking to determine, not what is or is not, in its nature, probative, but rather, passing by that inquiry, what among really probative matters, shall, nevertheless, for this or that practical reason, be excluded, and not even heard by the jury."<sup>4</sup> Courts of law, in the Anglo-Saxon system at least, go on the assumption that if one side presents all the permissible testimony in its favor and if the other side presents all the permissible testimony in its, the truth

<sup>2</sup> Wigmore, p. 181.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 238-45.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 125-34 and 354-60.

<sup>5</sup> *Preliminary Treatise on Evidence at the Common Law* (Boston, 1896), pp. 3-4.

will emerge plainly enough for judge and jury from the conflict or harmony of the testimony, even if some kinds of testimony are not permissible; and possibly where much and recent testimony is available, the innocent suffer less often by such an assumption than the guilty escape.

The historian, however, is prosecutor, attorney for the defense, judge, and jury all in one. But as judge he rules out no evidence whatever if it is relevant. To him any single detail of testimony is credible — even if it is contained in a document obtained by force or fraud, or is otherwise impeachable, or is based on hearsay evidence, or is from an interested witness — provided it can pass four tests:

(1) Was the ultimate source of the detail (the primary witness) *able* to tell the truth?

(2) Was the primary witness *willing* to tell the truth?

(3) Is the primary witness *accurately reported* with regard to the detail under examination?

(4) Is there any *independent corroboration* of the detail under examination?

Any detail (regardless of what the source or who the author) that passes *all four* tests is credible historical evidence. It will bear repetition that the *primary witness* and the *detail* are now the subjects of examination, not the source as a whole.

### *Ability to Tell the Truth*

(1) Ability to tell the truth rests in part upon the witness's nearness to the event. *Nearness* is here used in both a geographical and a chronological sense. The

reliability of the witness's testimony tends to vary in proportion to (a) his own remoteness from the scene in time and space, and (b) the remoteness from the event in time and space of his recording of it. There are three steps in historical testimony: observation, recollection, and recording (not to mention the historian's own perception of the witness's record). At each of these steps something of the possible testimony may be lost. Geographical as well as chronological closeness to the event affects all three steps and helps to determine both how much will be lost and the accuracy of what is retained.

(2) Obviously all witnesses even if equally close to the event are not equally competent as witnesses. *Competence* depends upon degree of expertness, state of mental and physical health, age, education, memory, narrative skill, etc. ~~The ability to estimate numbers~~ is especially subject to suspicion. The size of the army with which Xerxes invaded Greece in 480 B.C. was said by Herodotus to have numbered 1,700,000, but it can be shown to have been considerably less by the simple computation of the length of time it would have taken that many men to march through the Thermopylae Pass even unopposed. More recently by a similar computation doubt was thrown upon the veracity of a newspaper report from Moscow that one million men, women, and children paraded through the Red Square in celebration of the thirty-second anniversary of the October Revolution (November 7, 1949) in a five and one-half hour demonstration, for it would require more than fifty persons a second to march abreast past a given point to com-

plete a parade of one million in five and one-half hours.<sup>1</sup> With some notable exceptions, such as the *Domesday Book* of William the Conqueror, historians have been warned against using any source of numbers before the end of the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> The careful keeping of vital statistics was a relatively late innovation of the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Previous to that time tax rolls and incomplete parish records of baptisms, marriages, and burials were the best indications. Even battle casualty statistics before the nineteenth century are suspect, and historians still disagree on the cost in human life of wars up to and including those of Napoleon I, and, in some instances, beyond.

(3) *Degree of attention* is also an important factor in the ability to tell the truth. A well-known story, no less illustrative if it be apocryphal, tells of a psychology professor who deliberately staged a fight in his classroom between two students, which led to a free-for-all. When peace was restored, the professor asked each member of the class to write an account of what had happened. There were, of course, conflicting statements among the accounts, but, what was most significant, no student had noticed that the professor in the midst of the pandemonium had taken out a banana and had peeled and eaten it. Obviously the entire meaning of the event rested upon the unno-

ticed act; it was an experiment in the psychology of attention. Because each student's interest had been fixed upon his own part in the drama, each had given an erroneous interpretation of what had occurred. Magicians similarly depend upon their ability to divert attention from things they are doing to perpetrate some of their tricks. The common human inability to see things clearly and whole makes even the best of witnesses suspect.

(4) We have already discussed the danger of the *leading question* (p. 104). Such questions, by implying the expected answer, make it difficult to tell the whole truth. Lawyers also count the *hypothetical question* ("Supposing you did agree with me, would you act as I?"), and the *argumentative* or "loaded" question ("Have you stopped beating your wife?"), and the *coached answer* as belonging to kindred categories.<sup>3</sup> Such questions are especially liable to be misleading if they have to be answered "Yes" or "No." Allport gives a striking illustration of the kind of misinformation that can be derived from the witness whose narrative is circumscribed by the questioner. He mentions an investigator who "secured fifty topical autobiographies, forcing all writers to tell about radicalism and conservatism in their lives," and who from those biographies almost (but fortunately not quite) came to the conclusion that "radicalism-conservatism constitutes one of those first-order variables of which all personalities are compounded."<sup>4</sup>

(5) In the last instance the investigator barely

<sup>1</sup> Letter of John E. Finner, November 9, 1949, *New York Times*, November 15, 1949.

<sup>2</sup> Seignobos, *Méthode historique appliquée aux sciences sociales*, pp. 204-5.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Wigmore, pp. 147-50 and 160-2.

<sup>4</sup> Allport, p. 137.

missed *reasoning in a circle* -- from premise back to premise again. It has been contended also that one of the reasons why religious problems and events receive so much attention in the history of the Middle Ages is that its principal sources were written by clergymen. If medieval architects, landowners, soldiers, or merchants had written more, they might have asked and answered different kinds of questions and given a different picture of medieval life. Possibly, if the writings of our own intellectuals should prove to be the major source for future accounts of our age, future historians will be misled into thinking that intellectuals had a greater influence upon human affairs in our time than they actually have. This sort of circular argument must be especially guarded against when an effort is being made to ascribe unsigned writings to a supposed author, for it is easy to assume that the ideas of the writings are characteristic of the supposed author if those very articles are the basis of the assumptions regarding the author's characteristics.

(6) One almost inescapable shortcoming of the personal document is its *egocentrism*. It is to be expected that even a modest observer will tell what he himself heard and what he himself did as if those details were the most important things that were said and done. Often it is impossible for him to tell his story in any other terms, since that is the only way he knows it. This observation is a more or less inevitable corollary of the caution with regard to *attention* discussed above. The famous speech of the Comte de Mirabeau after Louis XVI's Royal Session of June 23, 1789, provides a pat illustration of how

easily such egocentrism may mislead the historian. Mirabeau (though speaking in the third person) told how he had said something about the necessity of force: "For we shall leave our seats only by the power of the bayonet." He failed to mention that several others were expressing a similar determination at about the same time, though probably in more moderate language. Therefore historians trusting too confidently to Mirabeau's testimony have sometimes made him the heroic center of a desperate crisis; still it is more probable that he was not so conspicuous or the situation so dramatic as he implied.<sup>11</sup>

In general, *inability to tell the truth* leads to errors of omission, rather than commission, because of lack of completeness or lack of balance in observation, recollection, or narrative. Such errors may give a picture that is out of perspective because it subordinates or fails to include some important things and over-emphasizes those it does include.

### *Willingness to Tell the Truth*

The historian also has to deal with documents whose authors, though otherwise competent to tell the truth, consciously or unconsciously ~~tell falsehoods~~. There are several conditions that tend especially toward untruthfulness and against which the experience of mankind has armed lawyers, historians, and others who deal with testimony.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Cf. F. M. and H. D. Fling, *Source Problems of the French Revolution* (New York, 1913), p. 129; cf. also pp. 123, 139, 144, and 148.

<sup>12</sup> Wigmore, pp. 176-90.

(1) One of the most elementary rules in the analysis of testimony is that which requires the exercise of caution against the *interested witness*. A witness's interest is obvious when he himself may benefit from perversion of the truth or may thereby benefit some one or some cause dear to him. Certain kinds of propaganda are perhaps the worst examples of deliberate perversion of truth out of a desire to benefit a cause. In the seventeenth century the word *propaganda* was applied to Catholic missionary work without disparagement. Since the nineteenth century, however, it has been used more or less derogatorily to designate any kind of concerted movement to persuade and the instruments of such persuasion. The word may be modern, but propaganda and its methods have been familiar since efforts were first made to influence public opinion.

(2) Often the benefit to be derived from a perversion of the truth is subtle and may not be realized by the witness himself. In such a case the cause of prevarication probably is *bias*. If the witness's *bias* is *favorable* to the subject of his testimony, it is frequently designated *studium*. If it is *unfavorable*, it may be designated *odium* or *ira*. The Latin words are derived from a declaration by Tacitus that he would write history *sine ira et studio* (thereby setting a standard that few historians, including Tacitus, have been able to achieve). *Studium* and *odium*, bias for and bias against, frequently depend upon the witness's social circumstances and may operate in a fashion of which he himself may not be aware. It becomes important to the historian to know what the

witness's *Weltanschauung* (or "frame of reference") may be, as well as his religious, political, social, economic, racial, national, regional, local, family, personal, and other ties (or "personal equation"). Any of these factors may dictate a predilection or a prejudice that will shade his testimony with nuances that otherwise might have been absent.

(3) The intended hearers or readers of a document, it has already been remarked (p. 90), play an important part in determining the truthfulness of a statement. The *desire to please* or to *displease* may lead to the coloring or the avoidance of the truth. Speakers at political rallies and at banquets, writers of wartime dispatches and communiqués, makers of polite letters and conversation are among the numerous producers of documents that may subtly pervert fact for that reason. Akin to and often associated with *interest* and *bias*, which are often socially determined, this motive is nevertheless different from them, being usually personal and individual. It may occasionally stand alone as an explanation of prevarication.

(4) *Literary style* sometimes dictates the sacrifice of truth. Epigrams and — notoriously — slogans of war and politics ("*L'état c'est moi*"; "Millions for defense but not one cent for tribute"; "The Old Guard dies but never surrenders"),<sup>12</sup> if properly discredited in the interests of accuracy and truthful reporting, would be robbed of pithiness and color. Authors of autobiographies and letters, especially when they write

<sup>12</sup> Paul Harsin, *Comment on écrit l'histoire* (Paris, 1933; English adaptation, Berkeley, 1935) contains an appendix that cites a number of other examples with critical analysis of their origin.

for private amusement, may feel tempted to state as fact what is only hearsay or tradition or even fiction; and frequently narrators and reporters (especially if they hope for large audiences) seek to appear omniscient rather than to use the less vigorous word, the less striking phrase, the *ifs* and *buts*, the *there-is-some-reason-to-believe* and the *it-is-perhaps-safe-to-say* of more precise discourse.

The anecdote is especially suspect. Much too often it is a subsequent invention to throw into humorous or striking relief some spectacular figure or episode. The more apposite the anecdote, the more dubious it is likely to be without corroboration. And yet the existence of an especially pat anecdote has a historical significance of its own—as showing the sort of thing believed of or imputed to the subject. A well known Italian proverb describes such anecdotes as felicitous (*ben trovato*) even if untrue.

(5) *Laws and conventions* sometimes oblige witnesses to depart from strict veracity. The same laws of libel and of good taste that have encouraged the hiding of the “resemblance to persons now living or dead” in fiction and moving pictures have precluded complete accuracy in some works of history. Some of the notorious inaccuracies of Jared Sparks as a historian were due to his writing of living characters from testimony by living witnesses who requested him not to use certain data.<sup>14</sup> Etiquette in letters and conversation, conventions and formalities in treaties and public documents require politeness and ex-

<sup>14</sup> Louis Gottschalk, *Lafayette and the Close of the American Revolution* (Chicago, 1942), p. 252.

pressions of esteem that are obviously false or empty. A successful comedy, James Montgomery's *Nothing but the Truth* (1916), was written around the valiant effort of a young man to go through a whole day without saying anything that was untrue; it nearly cost him all his friends. Religious concepts like the Christian Scientist's interpretation of the ideas of *evil*, *disease*, and *death* may lead to misunderstanding. Corporations, commissions, and societies are sometimes required by their articles of incorporation or constitutions to meet periodically, but when their numbers are small, the minutes of their meetings may be much more formal than the actual meetings.

(6) Closely akin to this category are the many instances of *inexact dating* of historical documents because of the conventions and formalities involved. For example, the official text of the Declaration of Independence is dated “In Congress, July 4, 1776.” To the unwary reader it would appear that those who signed it were present and did so on that day. In fact, the formal signing took place on August 2, 1776, and some members did not sign until a still later date.<sup>15</sup> Some medieval rulers used to date documents as of certain towns though they were not at those towns on the dates indicated. The modern official's and businessman's habit of sending letters on office stationery regardless of where they may be or of dictating but not reading their letters, which are signed by a rubber stamp or a secretary, may make it very difficult for future biographers to trace their itineraries.

<sup>15</sup> Carl Becker, *Declaration of Independence* (New York, 1922), pp. 184-5.

Bank checks, having the city of the bank's location printed on them, may also prove misleading as to the signer's whereabouts.

(7) *Expectation or anticipation* frequently leads a witness astray. Those who count on revolutionaries to be bloodthirsty and conservatives gentlemanly, those who expect the young to be irreverent and the old crabbed, those who know Germans to be ruthless and Englishmen to lack humor generally find bloodthirsty revolutionaries and gentlemanly conservatives, irreverent youth and crabbed old-age, ruthless Germans and humorless Englishmen. A certain lack of precision is found in such witnesses because their eyes and ears are closed to fair observation; or because, seeking, they find; or because in recollection, they tend to forget or to minimize examples that do not confirm their prejudices and hypotheses. (This sort of attitude is only a special kind of *bias* and might be regarded merely as a subdivision of Paragraph 2 above.)

\* \* \*

Unwillingness to tell the truth, whether intentional or subconscious, leads to misstatements of fact more often than omissions of fact. When the same witness is both unable and unwilling to tell the truth (as is mostly the case to some degree at least), the historian has before him a document that commits errors both of omission and commission. Yet he must continue to bear in mind that even the worst witness may occasionally tell the truth and that it is the historian's business to extract every iota of relevant truth, if he can.

### *Conditions Favorable to Credibility*

Fortunately there are certain conditions especially favorable to truthfulness, and students of evidence easily recognize them. They are frequently the reverse of the conditions that create an inability or an unwillingness to tell the truth.

(1) When the purport of a statement is a *matter of indifference to the witness*, he is likely to be unbiased.

(2) More dependably, when a statement is *prejudicial to a witness*, his dear ones, or his causes, it is likely to be truthful. That is why confessions, if not forcibly extracted and if deposed by those in good mental health, are considered excellent testimony, sometimes acceptable in law courts without other direct testimony.<sup>16</sup> The historian must be careful, however, to make sure that the statement really is considered by the witness to be prejudicial to himself. Cases like that of Charles IX's claim of responsibility for the St. Bartholomew Massacre, Bismarck's satisfaction with his revision of the Ems dispatch, and ex-Nazis' or ex-Communists' contrition over their youthful errors come all too readily to mind. In such cases the deponent may be engaged in a subtle and perhaps unconscious form of self-pity or even of boasting rather than in confession, and other tests of trustworthiness must be sought.

(3) Often, too, facts are so well-known, so much *matters of common knowledge*, that the witness would be unlikely to be mistaken or to lie about

<sup>16</sup> Wigmore, pp. 305-6.



them: viz., whether it rained last night, whether a prominent citizen was assassinated last Tuesday, whether a famous bishop was a notorious philanderer, whether a well-known lord had the largest herd of sheep in the county, etc. Whenever the implications of such testimony suggest that such matters are common knowledge — and especially when they are also commonplaces — the absence of contradictory evidence in other sources may frequently be taken to be confirmation. For example, it is a commonplace that old soldiers are grumblers, and, besides, many persons had abundant chance to observe this phenomenon in particular armies; hence we are prepared to believe the tradition that many of Napoleon's veterans were *grogards* even on otherwise inadequate testimony. If that kind of statement had been incorrectly reported, it would in all probability have been challenged by other contemporaries writing subsequently.

This process of reasoning rests, however, upon a sort of *argumentum ex silentio* ("Silence gives consent"), and such arguments can easily be abused. Care must be taken to ascertain whether, though apparently commonly known or commonplace, the matter under examination was in fact so regarded by other contemporaries, and whether they ever had a chance to learn of and to contradict the earlier testimony. In times of panic, for instance, it is easy to exaggerate the number of enemies of the state, and the very existence of the panic may lead to silence on the part of those who do not share it. Where, on the other hand, there is any reason to believe a matter extraordinary, though commonly known, the argument from

silence would work the other way: the very fact that a statement of something extraordinary was not corroborated in other sources that might have been expected to mention it would render it suspect. The ambivalence of the *argumentum ex silentio* makes it a weak test for most purposes. It is not the silence of other possible witnesses but whether an event was considered commonplace or extraordinary that lends credibility to or removes credibility from single statements on matters of common knowledge.

(4) Even when the fact in question may not be well-known, certain kinds of statements are *both incidental and probable* to such a degree that error or falsehood seems unlikely. If an ancient inscription on a road tells us that a certain proconsul built that road while Augustus was princeps, it may be doubted without further corroboration that that proconsul really built the road, but it would be harder to doubt that the road was built during the principate of Augustus. If an advertisement informs readers that "A and B Coffee may be bought at any reliable grocer's at the unusual price of fifty cents a pound," all the inferences of the advertisement may well be doubted without corroboration except that there is a brand of coffee on the market called "A and B Coffee." Although the opinion that "William Jones' widow is a more charming lady than Mrs. Brown" may have no validity as testimony regarding the relative merits of the two ladies, it is probably good evidence on the physical condition of William Jones.

Even the boldest propaganda may be made to yield credible information by a careful application of the

rule regarding *the incidental and the probable*. Such a statement in a propaganda leaflet as: "Our aircraft easily overcame the enemy's," would be, without confirmation from more reliable sources, thoroughly suspect with regard to the inferiority of the enemy. Yet it may be taken at its face value as evidence that the enemy have airplanes (especially since it is not only *incidental and probable* but also *contrary to interest* in that regard). And the statement may also have some value as evidence that "we" have airplanes (though that value is not as great as if the evidence were here also *contrary to interest*). When in a war or a diplomatic controversy one side takes the trouble to deny the propaganda of the other, neither the propaganda nor the denial may be certified thereby, but it becomes clear that the propaganda has seemed worthy of some attention to the other side.

(5) When the thought patterns and preconceptions of a witness are known and yet he states something out of keeping with them—in other words, if statements are *contrary to the witness's expectations or anticipations*, they have a high degree of credibility. Thus, a statement by a Soviet observer regarding instances of working-class contentment in a capitalist country or by a capitalist observer regarding instances of loyalty in a Soviet country would be especially impressive.

It must always be remembered that the skillful liar can sense those conditions favorable to credibility as well as most historians. Hence he can manufacture an air of credibility that may easily take in the unwary investigator. The existence of conditions favorable to

credibility such as these must first be established and never taken for granted in any given instance.

### *Hearsay and Secondary Evidence*

The historian, let us repeat, uses *primary* (that is, *eyewitness*) testimony whenever he can. When he can find no primary witness, he uses the best secondary witness available. Unlike the lawyer, he wishes to discover as nearly as possible what happened rather than who was at fault. If he sometimes has to make judgments, he does not have to pass sentence and hence he does not have the same hesitation as a judge to permit evidence that practice has ruled out of courtrooms.

In cases where he uses secondary witnesses, however, he does not rely upon them fully. On the contrary, he asks: (1) On whose primary testimony does the secondary witness base his statements? (2) Did the secondary witness accurately report the primary testimony as a whole? (3) If not, in what details did he accurately report the primary testimony? Satisfactory answers to the second and third questions may provide the historian with the whole or the gist of the primary testimony upon which the secondary witness may be his only means of knowledge. In such cases the secondary source is the historian's "original" source, in the sense of being the "origin" of his knowledge. In so far as this "original" source is an accurate report of primary testimony, he tests its credibility as he would that of the primary testimony itself.

Thus hearsay evidence would not be discarded by the historian, as it would be by a law court, merely

because it is hearsay. It is unacceptable only in so far as it cannot be established as accurate reporting of primary testimony. A single example will perhaps suffice to make that clear. A White House correspondent stating what the president had said at a press conference would be a primary source of information on the president's words. The same correspondent telling a presidential secretary's version of what the president had said would be a secondary or hearsay witness, and probably would be successfully challenged in a courtroom; and yet if the correspondent were a skilled and honorable reporter and if the presidential secretary were competent and honest, the correspondent's account might be a thoroughly accurate statement of what the president in fact had said. Even the most punctilious historian might retain that kind of evidence for further corroboration.

### *Corroboration*

A primary particular that has been extracted from a document by the processes of external and internal criticism so far described is not yet regarded as altogether established as historical fact. Although there is a strong presumption that it is trustworthy, the general rule of historians (we shall soon note exceptions, however) is to accept as historical only those particulars which rest upon the independent testimony of two or more reliable witnesses.<sup>17</sup>

The importance of the independence of the wit-

<sup>17</sup> Cf. e.g., Bernheim, pp. 195-6 and 544; C. V. Langlois and C. Seignobos, *Introduction to the Study of History*, tr. G. G. Berry (London, 1912), pp. 199-205.

nesses is obvious. Independence is not, however, always easy to determine, as the controversy over the Synoptic Gospels well illustrates. Where any two witnesses agree, it may be that they do so because they are testifying independently to an observed fact, but it is possible that they agree only because one has copied from the other, or because one has been unduly influenced by the other, or because both have copied from or been unduly influenced by a third source. Unless the independence of the observers is established, agreement may be confirmation of a lie or of a mistake rather than corroboration of a fact.

It frequently happens, however, especially in the more remote phases of history, that diligent research fails to produce two independent documents testifying to the same facts. It is also evident that for many historical questions—the kind that would especially interest the student of biography—there often can be no more than one immediate witness. Of the emotions, ideals, interests, sensations, impressions, private opinions, attitudes, drives, and motives of an individual only that individual can give direct testimony, unless their outward manifestations are sufficiently well understood to serve as a reliable index. Even when those inner experiences are known from the testimony of others to whom the subject may have told them, they rest ultimately upon his own powers of introspection. The biographer is in this regard no better off than the psychologist—and worse off if his witness is dead and beyond interview. And all history is biographical in part. The biographer does, however, have one advantage over the psychologist—he knows what

his subject is going to do next. He therefore can reason from response to sensation, from act to motive, from effect to cause. The completed behavior pattern may give confirmation to the biographer of the inward psychological processes of his subject.

It follows, then, that for statements known or knowable only by a single witness, we are obliged to break the general rule requiring two independent and reliable witnesses for corroboration. Hence we must look for other kinds of corroboration. A man's professed opinions or motives will seem more acceptable as his "honest" opinions or his "real" motives if they are not in keeping with the pattern of behavior that would be "fashionable" in the society in which he moved but at the same time are in keeping with what otherwise is known of his general character.<sup>18</sup> The very *silence* (i.e., absence of contradiction) of other contemporary sources upon a matter appearing to be common knowledge may sometimes be a confirmation of it (see above, p. 162). In other cases, a document's *general credibility* may have to serve as corroboration. The reputation of the author for veracity, the lack of self-contradiction within the document, the absence of contradiction by other sources, freedom from anachronisms, and the way the author's testimony fits into the otherwise known facts help to determine that general credibility.

Conformity or agreement with other known historical or scientific facts is often the decisive test of evidence, whether of one or of more witnesses. That

<sup>18</sup> Cf. P. H. Knight, "The Sickness of Liberal Society," *Ethics*, LVI (1946), 90-1.

Cellini saw fire-dwelling salamanders, devils, halos, and other supernatural phenomena would hardly seem credible to any modern historian, even if Cellini were otherwise generally truthful, consistent, and uncontradicted. And even if Cellini's statements were confirmed by independent witnesses, the historian would believe only that Cellini and his corroborators saw things they thought were salamanders, devils, and halos. General knowledge of how little effect a thumb in a hole in a dyke would have upon preserving a dyke that had begun to crumble would be sufficient to destroy credence in a well-known legend, even if there had been any witnesses to that Dutch hero's tale. Doubt can be thrown upon the old story that the potato was introduced into Ireland by Sir Walter Raleigh and hence to England by merely pointing to the fact that the Irish potato is of a different variety from the English potato.<sup>19</sup> What little we know about the time sequence of cause and effect induces us to believe that if notable contributions to anthropology appeared before and around 1859, the birth of modern anthropology cannot be said to be the result of the publication of Darwin's theory of evolution.<sup>20</sup> And, for obvious reasons, it is difficult to give much credence to a claim of virgin birth recently made in an English divorce case.

Because the *general credibility* of a document can rarely be greater than the credibility of the separate

<sup>19</sup> W. H. McNeill, "The Introduction of the Potato into Ireland," *Journal of Modern History*, XXI (1949), 219.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. R. J. Teggart, *Theory of History* (New Haven, 1925), pp. 203-6.

details in it, corroboration of the details of a witness's testimony by his general credibility is weak corroboration at best. Likewise the *argumentum ex silentio* and conformity or agreement with other known facts may be misleading. They are in the nature of circumstantial evidence, the weakness of which any reader of court proceedings and detective stories knows. While, in the cases under discussion, these tests are proposed only for confirmation of the direct testimony of one witness and not as exclusive sources of evidence, their circumstantial or presumptive nature renders them suspect even for that purpose. Hence historians usually insist that particulars which rest on a single witness's testimony should be so designated. They should be labeled by such tags as: "Thucydides says," "Plutarch is our authority for the statement that," "according to Suidas," "in the words of Erasmus," "if Boswell is to be believed," etc.

### *Certitude vs. Certainty*

Since such precautions are not always taken and these single-witness statements are not always treated as *probanda* capable only of a lower order of proof, a curious paradox results. For many early periods of history, less disagreement is found among the sources, because there are fewer sources, than for more recent periods. On what happened one or two thousand years ago, despite the steady increase in archeological, epigraphical, papyrological, and paleographical materials, the sources are few, fairly generally available and known, and the contradictions among them relatively familiar if not always reconciled. On what hap-

pened last year, the sources are many and not always known, and the contradictions among them not yet familiar or reconciled. It is easier, among the enormous collections of little exploited or totally untapped materials on happenings of recent periods to find something unknown to describe or to reinterpret a familiar story on the basis of hitherto unused documents than to do either for events of remote periods. Hence, as a general rule, the more recent the period of study, the more difficult it becomes to say something that will remain long unchallenged; for both the intensity of controversy and the likelihood of a new approach tend to increase with the proximity in time to one's own day. Thus a greater degree of consensus and certitude may easily exist among historians where the testimony is lacking than where it is full. Perhaps nothing provides more eloquent proof than this that the historian's "truths" are derived from analytical evaluations of an object called "sources" rather than of an object called "the actual past."